DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 834 JC 900 435

AUTHOR	Heaney, Barbara
TITLE	The Assessment of Educational Outcomes. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, Los Angeles, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-JC-90-01
PUB DATE	Jul 90
CONTRACT	RI88062002
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Accountability; *College Outcomes Assessment; College Planning; Community Colleges; Educational Trends; *Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Problems; *Evaluation Research; Graduate Surveys; Institutional Evaluation; Legislators; Models; *Outcomes of Education; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

With the growing demand for accountability by legislators, outcomes assessment has become a much higher institutional priority for community colleges. According to a recent survey, two-thirds of the states have implemented formal assessment initiatives, compared to a very few states only 1 year earlier. Institutions, however, must be careful that assessment is not used only to ensure accountability, but also to enhance institutional quality. Effective and meaningful assessment evolves within a collaborative framework in which both legitimate legislative needs and the integrity of institutional autonomy are respected equally. Follow-up studies and job placement surveys are often adequate for institutional needs but do not sufficiently fulfill state requirements. Some colleges have therefore implemented comprehensive assessment programs which attempt to evaluate quality at all levels, over time, through systematic reviews of academic programs and services and longitudinal studies of educational trends. One model identifies six areas of concern faced by all colleges: access and equity; employment preparation and placement; college/university transfer; economic development; college/community partnerships; and cultural and cross-cultural development. In 1988, a national study of outcomes measures investigated the use of academic progress and employment outcomes, student learning outcomes, and student satisfaction outcomes among a sample of 675 institutions of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. Over 90% of the respondents expected outcomes measures to maintain their current priority or increase in priority over the next 3 to 5 years. The results of outcomes assessment should help colleges identify where present efforts and priorities lie and where they should be placed. (JMC)

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ERIC DIGEST

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The Assessment of Educational Outcomes

by Barbara Heaney

Community colleges have employed various methods of measuring educational outcomes for many years and for many purposes. Since state and federal legislatures have entered the picture, however, outcomes assessment has become a much higher institutional priority. Legislators feel they have a responsibility to the public to demand accountability for dollars spent and expect evidence that new monies will go toward the improvement of institutions. According to a recent survey, two-thirds of the states have implemented formal "assessment" initiatives, compared to a very few states only one year earlier (Kreider and Walleri, 1988).

Though legislators' concerns are certainly valid, when outcomes assessment is used only to ensure accountability, it can become just one more reporting requirement. In response to endless demands for data from an increasing number of constituencies, one institutional researcher commented, "Seldom was the question asked: What do the data signify in regard to progress or lack of it toward the mission or goals of the institution...? One barely had time to pause and ask what the data meant: Better or worse, slower or faster growth, less or more effective -- than what? According to what criteria?" (Fenske, 1978, p.80).

Effective and meaningful assessment evolves within a collaborative framework in which both legitimate legislative needs and the integrity of institutional autonomy are respected equally (Kreider and Walleri). Certainly, the assessment process must look honestly at institutional and program deficiencies, but it must also be a vehicle for highlighting institutional strengths and accomplishments.

Appropriate Criteria

For years, community college leaders have argued that traditional measures of institutional quality were invalid when applied to their institutions. Such criteria as student preparedness, number of PhD's on the faculty, expenditure per student, and outside resources secured for research reflect what an institution *has* rather than what it *does* (Astin, 1983). As an alternative, the community college systems in Virginia and Kentucky as well as many individual community colleges have moved toward value-added approaches to assessment. "In value-added terms, the quality of an institution is not based on the performance level of the students it admits, but on the changes or improvements in performance that the institution is able to effect in its students" (Astin, 1983, p. 135).

Through the use of follow-up studies, employer surveys, and job placement results, community colleges have attempted to determine whether the college experience has added value to students' lives (Simmons, 1988). Though often adequate for institutional needs, these methods do not sufficiently fulfill state requirements. In an attempt to balance the public's need for accountability with the institution's need for self-evaluation and improvement, community colleges have sought more accurate instruments and approaches to the assessment of student learning and institutional effectiveness.

Some colleges have implemented comprehensive assessment programs, which attempt to evaluate quality at all levels over time through systematic reviews of academic programs and services, and longitudinal studies of educational trends. Strong support for comprehensive assessment can also be found among accreditation agencies. The Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association contends that "carefully devised longitudinal studies having faculty input will provide ultimately the most effective means for judging institutional effectiveness and student outcomes" (Simmons, p. 16). Findings from longitudinal assessment efforts tend to be more accurate than one-time studies. They also have the capacity to demonstrate long-term changes and patterns of growth.

According to Kreider and Walleri, a multidimensional research approach using both qualitative and quantitative methods to measure students' cognitive and affective development and assess institutional effectiveness is essential to a solid comprehensive program. Simmons suggests a research/accreditation model incorporating:

- a review of institutional mission,
- the evaluation of programs and curricula,
- administrator and faculty evaluations,
- facilities utilization studies,
- longitudinal studies of students and alumni,
- enrollment management,
- environmental impact studies,
- community impact studies, and ,
- financial and management audits.

The National Alliance of Community and Technical Colleges (Grossman and Duncan, 1988) has developed a

value-added model for measuring a college's performance in terms of external demands and its own stated mission. The model identifies six areas of concern faced by all colleges: access and equity; employment preparation and placement; college/university transfer; economic development; college/community partnerships; and cultural and cross-cultural development. Related to these six areas are 38 indicators of measurable outcomes, which provide a foundation for the assessment of institutional effectiveness.

In 1987, the Virginia State Council of Higher Education called for each community college in the state to develop a comprehensive student assessment and reporting process (Roesler,1988). The assessment plans were designed to (1) evaluate students' academic performance at entry, at mid-point in their studies, at graduation or exit, and subsequently as transfers to four-year colleges or as employees in the workplace; (2) assess the colleges' academic programs and services by measuring students' achievement in remedial programs and declared majors; and (3) continuously involve faculty in the entire student assessment process from the design of tests to the use of assessment results for the improvement of instruction and curricula.

National Trends

In 1988, a national study was conducted by the American College Testing Program (ACT) and two affiliate councils of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) to investigate and advance the use of student outcomes measures for assessing institutional effectiveness (Cowart, 1990). Three sets of student outcomes were identified for in-depth study: academic progress and employment outcomes, student learning outcomes, and student satisfaction outcomes. Member institutions of the AACJC were surveyed to determine which of these outcomes were measured, in what manner, and to what purpose. Responses were received from 675 institutions, revealing that:

- 61% of the colleges used academic progress and employment measures to assess institutional effectiveness, and 66% of the colleges assigned higher priority to these outcomes than to other types of student outcomes;
- only 35% of the colleges measured student learning outcomes and used results to assess institutional effectiveness;
- skills assessment at entry was more common than exit-only assessment or entry-exit comparisons;
- 55% of the colleges used student satisfaction as a measure of institutional effectiveness;
- about 75% used measures of academic progress and employment outcomes in the accreditation process; and
- curriculum development was most often cited as the activity most affected by the use of outcomes measures.

Conclusion

The assessment of institutional effectiveness will become increasingly important in the coming decade. Over 90% of the respondents to the ACT survey expected outcomes measures to maintain their current priority or increase in priority over the next three to five years. Used properly, the results of outcomes assessment can help a college identify where present efforts and priorities lie and where they should be placed. External constituencies will be afforded proof that the college is committed to improvement and growth, that its efforts have been worthwhile, and that both individuals and the college are progressing toward their respective goals.

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